

Review

Service User and Carer Participation in Social Work

Janet Warren

Exeter: Learning Matters, 2007, 141pp

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This is a thorough and sensible book, one of the Transforming Social Work Practice series intended primarily for social work students on degree courses. To that end, the content is mapped to the learning requirements for the degree and to the codes of conduct which underpin professional registration.

As might be expected, the book's chapters move from setting the context for participation, through to models and approaches to facilitation techniques for adults and separately for children and young people. Each chapter is full of suggested activities and opportunities to reflect and learn. A particularly important central chapter supports examination of the reader's own values and attitudes – surely one of the key components of professional development for any social worker. It also reminds us of the attributes and approaches that users and carers of all ages value and should expect. Interestingly I realised on re-reading the survey outcomes that these do not include any direct reference to professional knowledge or practice skills - they are all about the interpersonal and values which affect the relationship between user or carer and social worker. Fortunately for developing expertise, this book is also well grounded in the knowledge and practice base for participation and provides digests, references and suggestions for further study. The reference section in particular gives a splendid overview of the literature and policy guidance.

What is startling, considering the recent date of publication, is the speed at which the user and carer empowerment debate has moved on. This book refers to the empowerment movement and is clearly rooted

in ideas of practice that exemplify these approaches. Its development however predates the recent political imperative in England towards direct payments, personalised budgets and the implementation implications of 'In Control'. In this sense only, the practices of participation included could be reduced to the tokenism quite properly rejected in the text. Rarely can an updating chapter for a publication have been required quite so rapidly.

That said, this is a sound book, well constructed for its core purpose of supporting social work education. I remain bemused however by the distinction in activities suggested for students between those identified for work with children and young people, and those for adults. You might want to guess which set were more entertaining.

Jennifer Bernard
Consulting Director

Social Work: An introduction to contemporary practice
Kate Wilson, Gillian Ruch, Mark Lymbery, Andrew Cooper
Harlow: Pearson Education, 2008, 721pp
ISBN 97814058584 5 (pbk.) £27.99

This is a very useful and ambitious text, which is likely to become a recommended item on the reading lists of social work courses across the UK. I predict that this will also become an essential reference text for a large number of social work students, who will be endeared to it by the fact that such a wealth of information can be found in one reasonably priced volume. Such a distinction is well deserved. Here we find an impressively comprehensive range of subject material, which despite the breadth and weight of information remains easily digestible. Each chapter commences with a review of the National Occupational Standards to contextualise the relevance of topics under consideration. A plethora of case studies, many thought-provoking, are offered throughout, along with highlighted boxes entitled variously 'A closer look' and 'Think ahead', which are used for magnification and analysis of certain issues. The chapters include points for reflection and conclude with a highlighted summary, all of which are helpful pedagogical

strategies and serve to create an easy-to-read, highly informative text.

The book is divided into three main parts, prefaced by an Introduction that seeks to emphasise a key aspect of social work – the relationship bound nature of effective practice. This crucial issue has been somewhat eclipsed in contemporary social work by the heavy bureaucratisation of the profession. It is therefore most welcome to see that relationship-building, together with reflectivity in practice takes centre stage.

Part One, 'Understanding Social Work', carries the agenda of setting the context of professional work through a review of the background of the profession, a critique of values and the politics of social work (the latter being an important aspect that is often neglected). The knowledge base of social work is an obvious addition to Part One, as are the legal parameters of practice; but perhaps less expected is a succinct discussion of human development and associated theories, the condensation of which will appeal to student readers in particular. Finally, there is a welcome focus on social work research in which is becoming of increasing importance to the profession overall.

Part Two is devoted to 'Practice Skills and Theories' where a solid review of the assessment process is inherently inked to a main theme of the book: the nature and quality of the relationship in the service user-practitioner dyad. The principles, foundations and ideology of good social work practice are unpacked in this section in terms of a number of interlocking subjects, such as communication skills and the involvement of service users and family carers.

Part Three revolves once again around relationships across a diverse range of service users, from children and families, to young offenders and vulnerable adults, and in so doing offers relevant guidelines and excellent insight into the issues that impact upon specific groups.

This text draws upon the considerable expertise of a variety of well known academics and experts in their field and is therefore a very valuable addition to the social work literature. If any criticisms can be offered however, this probably lies in the fact that so much ground is covered it is difficult for the authors to do due justice to each topic in equal depth. The complex issues of 'race'/ethnicity are a case in point, in which although case studies conscientiously denote the ethnic background of the participants, it is not at all clear what relevance this has to the case itself. Much the same can be said of those few case studies which note a religious background e.g. a Muslim service user with disabilities. Such issues could be more usefully teased out to avoid this

becoming a somewhat meaningless identifier. Nonetheless this particular critique does not detract notably from an otherwise well written and invaluable text, which I can recommend highly

Dr Sara Ashencaen Crabtree
Senior Lecturer in Health & Social Care
Bournemouth University
